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## **THINK weapons safety this summer**

**By U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center**

From the moment Soldiers enter basic training, they receive constant instruction on how to care for and respect their firearms. Since Soldiers work with weapons nearly every day, it's easy to assume no one would be better equipped to handle a gun at home. However, the reality is that on average, the Army has lost five Soldiers each of the past three years to off-duty weapons handling accidents.

According to Tracey Russell, a weapons safety expert at the U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center, the answer to why these seemingly proficient Soldiers die from unintentional shootings is attributed to several different factors.

"In the majority of Army POW accidents, it's clear the basic fundamentals of safe weapons handling are ignored," Russell said. "The most prevalent mistakes that lead to these accidents are horseplay, improper clearing procedures and failure to keep the weapon on safe and finger off the trigger when there's no intent to fire."

Overconfidence and complacency are primary contributors to these mistakes, Russell said. Many Soldiers seem to think that because they frequently handle weapons without incident while on duty, they should have no problem with their firearms at home. Sadly, this is a deadly assumption. Off duty, there isn't a supervisor nearby to enforce the standard, and past negligent discharge accidents prove it's all too easy for Soldiers to neglect the basics of firearm safety.

"It cannot be stressed enough that every weapon should always be treated as if it's loaded, even if you 'know' it isn't," Russell said. "We've lost too many Soldiers in accidents involving 'unloaded' weapons."

Other commonalities shared by most Army POW accidents include the involvement of alcohol and time of day, especially during the late evening or early morning hours. From April 2009 to September 2009, three Soldiers were killed in off-duty accidental shootings, all between the hours of 10 p.m. and 2 a.m. Alcohol use was confirmed in two of the three cases.

Obviously, alcohol and firearms are a lethal combination. During a time of summer barbecues and other social functions that typically involve drinking, it's extremely important to resist the urge to "show off" the latest addition to the gun cabinet.

"If you or anyone in the area has been drinking, leave your weapons secured in a safe place," Russell said. "Under the influence of alcohol, even the most responsible person might take unnecessary risks that could end in tragedy."

Soldiers looking to buy a personal firearm should also remember that different types of weapons have different characteristics and handling procedures.

“If you’re purchasing a personal weapon, you owe it to yourself, your Family and your unit to get the right training and read the owner’s manual,” Russell said, adding that while there are many sources of firearms training available, the best place to start looking is the local installation. Many posts offer basic weapons safety classes at the installation shooting range, and Soldiers can also check out nearby gun and hunting clubs and gun shops to see what training they provide or recommend.

Finally, it’s important to remember the Family aspect of firearms safety. According to the National Institutes of Health, a child as young as three years old has enough strength to pull the trigger on a handgun. Further, of all unintentional shootings reported annually in the United States, more than half were committed by children and teens. Always store guns unloaded and in a locked gun safe or cabinet to ensure little hands stay safe.

Despite the dangers posed by irresponsible handling of POWs, firearms-related fatalities within the Army are trending downward. As of April 1, 2010, one negligent discharge fatality has been recorded for the fiscal year, compared to an average of five per year from fiscal 2007 to fiscal 2009. To keep this trend going in the right direction and eliminate all needless losses, Soldiers should remember to THINK safety any time they’re handling a POW:

**Treat every weapon as if it’s loaded.**

**Handle every weapon with care.**

**Identify the target before you fire.**

**Never point the muzzle at anything you don’t intend to shoot.**

**Keep the weapon on safe and your finger off the trigger until you intend to fire.**

For more information on safe weapons handling, visit the USACR/Safety Center’s Range and Weapons Safety Toolbox Web site at <https://safety.army.mil> or the National Shooting Sports Foundation’s Safety Web site at <http://www.nssf.org/>.

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